

CHAPTER 1

The Nature and Scope of Patristics

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The *Companion to Patristics* is not another patrology and is not intended to be. There are many excellent and respected patrologies (Chapter 3), as well as monographs devoted to individual Fathers, some of which are referenced within this volume. The *Companion* has a different aim. It focuses on the reception history of a selection of Fathers in order to show how their writings and their reputations were viewed down the centuries. There is a common assumption that the works of the Fathers were always there to be consulted, but the history of their reception tells a different story. By looking at this history we can better understand why some names and texts are more familiar to us than others and the circumstances that have contributed to this. In addition to the reception histories, the *Companion to Patristics* offers a number of studies pertaining to topics that were important to patristic authors and their literary output.

The Patristic Age

There has been something of a resurgence of interest in the writings of the Fathers in the last 30 years or so. While this can be seen as a continuation of movements within the Catholic and Orthodox communities, it has also been due to the promotion of Late Antiquity as a historical period and the contribution made to it by patristic authors. For a long time this period suffered, together with the study of Byzantium, from indifference and neglect, being of no interest to traditional classicists who focused on Greece and Rome. Today, most of that has changed, so that now both Late Antiquity and Byzantium are flourishing fields of research and teaching. The literature written by Christian authors during these periods was composed not only in Latin and Greek, but also in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, and Arabic. The diversity of languages and cultures embraced by the Fathers was instrumental in the formation of medieval European and Middle Eastern civilization.

The language barriers that prevented these oriental Christian texts from being accessible to a western readership are gradually being removed. The situation is improving as new editions and translations into English and other modern languages become more widely available. This is happening along with a revival of interest in learning Syriac, Coptic, and other ancient Christian languages, in addition to Greek and Latin. In the *Companion to Patristics* we have included a Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian Father (Chapters 8, 12, and 19), as well as an assessment of the Fathers in Arabic (Chapter 30), but this hardly does justice to the large body of patristic writings in these languages. There is still some way to go before we have a complete library of patristic literature from these traditions in critical editions and translations.

The old Latin and Greek parameters defining the study of patristics did not allow for this diversity of languages and geographical spread. It was not only the linguistic parameters that defined the patristic age, but also the confessional base that many scholars brought to their study of the Fathers, carrying with them doctrinal positions that determined their perception and acceptance of which Fathers to study. Today, we take a more inclusive approach to the study of church history and who owns that history in line with the ecumenical spirit of our times. This has brought a fresh interest in the transmission of early Christianity to regions beyond the traditional geographical and cultural boundaries (Tabbernee 2014). At the same time, there have been advances in our knowledge of the contribution made by women, as well as the application of a feminist approach to the study of patristics (Levine and Robbins 2008).

Patristics has been defined as the study of the writings of the Fathers of the Church; while this definition may still suffice, we might want to ask which Fathers are meant and which church is being referred to. This is because we are conscious that the early church was fractured and divided along fault lines that are still visible. There is now a clearer understanding of the divisions left behind by the early councils and the subsequent history of Christian communities outside the Rome–Constantinople axis. This, in turn, has led to a less confessional reading of the Fathers and the role they played across the Christological spectrum, irrespective of the process that made some Fathers saints in one church and heretics in another. While the confessional approach has its place, the study of patristics is no longer the prerogative of theological faculties and seminaries.

Certainly, the western definition of the patristic age can be challenged from a variety of viewpoints, especially when looked at from outside a European perspective, where the parameters defining the western time-frame do not apply. The eighth-century terminus traditionally concluded with Venerable Bede in the Latin west and with John of Damascus in the Greek east. The fact that there were Fathers in the Byzantine tradition after John of Damascus, such as Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas (Chapter 20), as well as in the Oriental Orthodox churches, was seldom mentioned, let alone discussed. This was because the western interpretation of the patristic period was applied to the rest of the Christian world without considering what might have been happening there.

Patristic Literature

Patristic literature covers a wide range of genres, including not only theology, spirituality, and apologetics, but also philosophy, ecclesiology, hagiography (Chapter 25), homiletics, liturgics (Chapter 26), epistolography, hymnography, and poetry. The corpus of writings of an individual Father may embrace only two or three of these, while our interest in them may be from a variety of disciplines and points of view. Generally speaking, patristic literature is retrospective in orientation; that is, it takes its inspiration from the past. However, this does not mean the Fathers were disinterested in the future or indifferent to the present. We know that many of them were personally involved in the political and religious controversies of their times. Some of their writings stem directly from their involvement in such events, for which they suffered persecution and exile, and in some cases imprisonment and torture. Most were canonized by their respective churches as a result of bearing witness to the truth or for their contribution as bishops and church leaders.

It goes without saying that we read patristic literature differently from the way it was read in the past. Many changes have contributed to this. In the age before printing, the writings of the Fathers were known largely through florilegia and collections consisting of thematic excerpts (Chapter 2). Copying manuscripts was time consuming and labor intensive, although the invention of new writing systems, such as the minuscule script, helped to speed things up. Some works owe their existence to the work of stenographers, while others survive as a result of serendipity. Nowadays, the Fathers are benefiting from the digital age, giving us easier access to their writings than previous generations; but whether we are better equipped to understand them is another question. In the case of patristic authors, it may not be what we find as individuals that matters, but what we share with others from earlier generations who also admired them. It is the ability of the Fathers to speak to us across the generations in mainly dead languages that paradoxically keeps them alive.

Many of the writings of the Fathers are highly stylized and rhetorical. They were written at a time when language imitated classical models (Chapters 31 and 32), and in doing so they may appear more focused on eloquence than substance. That being said, patristic literature can convey a dimension beyond the immediate text that obliges us to meditate upon the meaning of what we have read. The words may inspire us to go beyond the literal sense to a level of reflection that is not easy to define, and perhaps impossible to define, given the mystical nature of the message being conveyed. Just as the Fathers contemplated scripture and absorbed it to become living exponents and witnesses to its meaning, so in turn they imbued their own writings with multiple layers of meaning, compelling us to explore more fully the implications of their words. The fact that the Fathers continue to attract our attention shows the power of their message to engage us.

A Major Modern Father

By tracing the reception history of a number of Fathers the *Companion to Patristics* shows the peaks and troughs to which some of them have been subjected. While the names of many Fathers are known to us, just as many have been forgotten or

neglected. An example of the latter was the Greek theologian of the seventh century, Maximos the Confessor (Chapter 17). The rediscovery of Maximos' writings in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been nothing less than phenomenal. Through translations and studies his work has been brought to a new generation of readers who were barely aware of his existence, let alone the role he played in the ecclesiastical politics of his time. He is now appreciated as a key figure in the Christological disputes of the seventh century and a major theologian in the history of Christian thought (von Balthasar 1961; Thunberg 1965).

In the case of Maximos it was the general neglect of the seventh century that hid his contribution from us. He continued to be known in the Eastern Orthodox world, but due to historical circumstances this knowledge was confined mainly to monastic circles. It was as a result of being given the lion's share of extracts in the *Philokalia* (itself a monastic achievement) in the late eighteenth century that his writings gained a wider audience, but not at that time in the west (Louth 2012). The fact that it took so long for his contribution to be finally recognized might make us think what other Fathers remain to be rediscovered. Now that we are better informed about Maximos' works we recognize him for the outstanding thinker that he was.

In the Greek *Life* of Maximos he is praised for his literary style as well as for his abilities as an expositor of theological problems:

But no less will someone see the anagogy of Maximus in reading his writings and the scholia composed by him on the compositions of the great Gregory [Nazianzus]; for many of these, as we know, being hard to comprehend and unclear in their wording, especially those which deal with doctrine and Trinitarian theology, he saw the meaning in them and brought it to greater clarity by light of spiritual wisdom, not only by more mystical understanding and contemplation, but also putting the explanation in an excellent style and very beautiful diction (Neil and Allen 2003: 77).

It is through his insights into difficult theological issues that Maximos uncovers the hidden depths in the writings of earlier Fathers. He was able to explicate the theology of Gregory of Nazianzus (Chapter 21) and Dionysius the Areopagite (Chapter 14) for his own generation and subsequently for us as well. In his *Ambigua* he responds to questions raised by various correspondents asking for clarity on certain points in the Theologian's teaching (Constas 2014). In explaining Gregory, Maximos demonstrates the perspicacity of his own thought, and moves us to a greater appreciation of the spiritual world they both inhabited.

The Continuing Tradition

Understanding the place of tradition in the writings of the Fathers is an essential aspect of studying them, although this has not always been acknowledged. Part of the increased interest in patristics in the west has been the need for a more balanced and nuanced response to the role of tradition in shaping early Christianity. The recovery of

patristic commentary on the scriptures has led to a revival of interest in the writings of the early Fathers. This has been particularly noticeable among Protestant scholars, who have come to recognize the value of the patristic interpretation of scripture. This has led to the founding of such series as the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, which is now set to be translated into a number of European and Asian languages. This, in turn, has given rise to further offshoots, such as *Ancient Christian Doctrine* and *Ancient Christian Texts*.

The value of tradition and the way that it was understood by the Fathers was instrumental in initiating another series, the *Message of the Fathers of the Church*. Each volume in this series took the form of an anthology of primary sources focused on a particular topic, such as biblical interpretation or social thought. It was published in the belief that both scripture and tradition were essential for understanding the formation of the early church, only this understanding needs to be extended beyond the first five centuries. The Reformation notion that the first five centuries represented a kind of golden age meant that theological issues after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 were thought not to be of interest, and belonged to a period that contributed nothing to the advancement of Christian doctrine. Yet, it is interesting to witness the western fascination with icons in recent decades and the need to understand the theology behind the practice of painting and venerating them. This need has initiated a new interest in the topic of Byzantine iconoclasm and the arguments put forward by iconophile Fathers (Chapter 23), such as John of Damascus (Chapter 18) and the bishops at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 (Pelikan 1990; Parry 1996).

Just as in earlier times, anthologies of the writings of the Fathers have continued into the present century, with such series as the *Early Church Fathers* published by Routledge. This series has attracted new translations of Fathers who have not always been at the forefront of patristic studies. The selections from the works of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Severus of Antioch (Chapter 15) are two that come to mind. Of particular interest has been the *Popular Patristics* series published by St Vladimir's Seminary Press in New York. This series has proved to be successful not only for publishing a range of patristic texts from across the traditions, but also for the high standard of its translations. It has published works from Coptic and Syriac as well as Greek and Latin in paperback editions, making them accessible to a wide readership. Other well-established series continue to flourish, such as *Sources Chrétiennes*, *Ancient Christian Writers*, *Fathers of the Church*, and *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*. The recently established *Corpus Christianorum in Translation* series is a welcome addition to any patristic collection.

The Authority of the Fathers

While scriptural knowledge is fundamental to patristic thought and authorship, it is far from biblical fundamentalism in the modern sense of the term. This is often missed by commentators not versed in historical theology who imagine that modern biblical fundamentalism can be applied to pre-modern theological thought. The authority of the

scriptures was paramount to the Fathers and inseparable from tradition, but it was not their only source of authority. In his discussion on the divinity of the Holy Spirit, Gregory of Nazianzus suggests that doctrine is progressive because divine matters are revealed and understood in stages (*Oration* 31: 26). In the light of this the teachings of the Fathers themselves became authoritative and part of tradition. From the fourth century, the appeal to the Fathers was assimilated into patristic methodology, although not everyone was happy with it, particularly when it appeared to override the authority of scripture (Graumann 2012).

As a scholar of intellectual history, the ninth-century patriarch of Constantinople, Photios, was well acquainted with the historical context in which the Fathers wrote and the controversies they were responding to. Because of this he was able to point out that not everything written by them was binding from a dogmatic point of view. In his second letter to Pope Nicholas of 861 he makes the following remark:

Everyone should preserve what is defined by common ecumenical decisions, but a particular opinion of a church father or a definition issued by a local synod may be followed by some and ignored by others (*Epistle* 290: 204–208).

This is certainly not an invitation to develop ideas incompatible with the teachings of the church councils, but it does allow for some diversity of thought and opinion. To some extent Photios was following what an earlier patriarch of Constantinople had written in the seventh century. Richard Price in this volume (Chapter 27) has referred to the correspondence between Patriarch Sergius and Pope Honorius on this issue.

The personal opinions (*theologumena*) of the Fathers might not be on a par with the decisions of church councils, but they could still be developed or disregarded as the case may be. The desire to harmonize the teachings of the Fathers in order to arrive at a consensus is understandable in the context of the controversies of the time. The idea that they spoke with one voice had the particular aim of showing that they were witnesses to a shared tradition that was both ancient and orthodox. Yet this was largely achieved by taking their teachings out of their original context and imposing uniformity on disparate material. In the case of the works attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, the desire to maintain their apostolic authorship meant that ambiguities remained unresolved, even when they were known to be the result of later or non-Christian influences.

The application of non-scriptural terms, however, did not have to mean innovation in doctrine. The Fathers understood perfectly well where they were situated in relation to the cultural environment in which they worked. For example, John of Damascus wrote in the eighth century:

Where can you find in the Old Testament or in the Gospel explicit use of such terms as “Trinity” or “homoousios” or “one nature of the Godhead” or “three hypostases,” or that Christ is “one hypostasis with two natures?” Yet, the meanings of these things are found, expressed in other phrases contained in the scriptures, which the fathers have interpreted for us (*Third Oration on the Holy Images* 11: 1–8).

Searching the scriptures in order to make explicit what was merely implied was standard exegesis among the Fathers (Chapter 24). The patristic commentaries on scripture were a basic resource for authenticating Christian teaching and provided an abundant harvest of scholarship for later generations to reap.

The Ascetic Orientation

It is important to understand the role and function of asceticism in reading the lives and writings of the Fathers. As a result of recent scholarly research, a change has taken place in our understanding of sexual and social renunciation in early Christianity (Brown 1988; Clark 1999). This, in turn, has led to a more nuanced assessment of asceticism and its contribution to Christian culture in the formative period and beyond. It is now accepted that ascetic practice was part of Christianity from the beginning, just as it was for other contemporary philosophical and religious movements (Finn 2009). From the fourth century monasticism became the institutionalized form of Christian asceticism, providing a suitable environment for nurturing literary talent and scholarship. Without the institution of monasticism it is hard to see how patristic literature could have flourished in the way that it did.

The reassessment of asceticism has seen a renewed interest in the writings and spirituality of the desert Fathers and Mothers (Chapter 22). Their attraction for us lies as much in their austere lifestyles as in their sayings, even though most of us will never become desert dwellers. The wisdom of the desert may be remote from us in time, but it has an immediacy and simplicity that makes it accessible to new generations of readers. This wisdom permeates the writings of Isaac of Nineveh, who turned dispassion into compassion for all living things, including demons and those in hell. He writes:

What is a charitable heart? It is a heart which is burning with charity for the whole of creation, for humans, for birds, for animals, for the demons – for all creatures. He who has such a heart cannot see or call to mind a creature without his eyes becoming filled with tears by reason of the immense compassion which seizes his heart. A heart which is softened and can no longer bear to see or learn from others of any suffering, even the smallest pain, being inflicted upon any creature. This is why such a person never ceases to pray also for the animals, for the enemies of the truth, and for those who do us evil, that they may be preserved and purified. He will pray for the reptiles, moved by the infinite pity which reigns in the hearts of those who are becoming united to God (Hansbury 1989: 12).

Issac's spiritual vision saw divine providence operating in every aspect of our lives in ways that we cannot know or even imagine. Like his contemporary Maximus the Confessor, his writings are just as thought provoking and relevant today as when they were first written. They were soon translated from Syriac into Greek and other languages to become a staple of monastic reading. Some might have thought twice before reading him, however, had they known he was from a church that was dubbed "Nestorian," yet he was acknowledged as a saint across the ecclesiastical divide (Alfeyev 2000).

The modern fascination with the desert Fathers may be traced to 1874 when the French novelist Gustave Flaubert published the final version of his novel *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*. It is written in the form of a play covering one night in the life of Anthony the Great in the desert during which he struggles against a series of demons. It was Athanasius of Alexandria (Chapter 7) who gave us the literary legend on which the novel is based. Flaubert was inspired by a painting he saw of the temptation of St Anthony, and several modern artists have painted the theme of Anthony's temptation, including Paul Cézanne and Salvador Dali. Flaubert's novel deals with the seven deadly sins, originally the eight thoughts of Evagrius of Pontus and modified in the writings of John Cassian. In the music sphere the composers Ottorino Respighi and John Tavener both wrote operas based on the legend of the desert Mother Mary of Egypt.

In 2008 the Egyptian Muslim author and Islamic scholar Youssef Ziedan published his novel *Azazeel*, which won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction and was recently translated into English (Ziedan 2012). It tells the story of a Coptic monk who travels from Upper Egypt to Alexandria and then to Jerusalem and Syria at the time of Cyril of Alexandria (Chapter 11) and Nestorius of Constantinople (Chapter 13). As well as dealing with historical persons and events, such as the death of Hypatia, it describes the demonic forces that assail the monk, including the demon called Azazeel of the book's title. It is a notable literary acknowledgment of a period that has not been dealt with by modern Egyptian authors.

Conclusion

Thus, the lives and writings of the Fathers, whether of the desert variety or not, continue to find readers from different backgrounds and with different interests. Our reasons for studying them may not be same and may even be at variance, but what is important is that they engage us no less today than they did in the past, and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future. The *Companion to Patristics* is a tribute to their ability to go on breathing new life into us and our ability to do the same for them.

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